"The Portrayal of Self in select Arabic Autobiographical Texts (900 CE to 1900 CE) in English Translation: A Critical Analysis"

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Introduction:

Since the beginning of written discourse forms in the developed cultures around the world, Autobiographical accounts by distinguished persons have occupied a noteworthy place in the overall world literary history. The contemporary inclination of scholars towards literary studies of texts in translation (as their formal acceptance in the world literary canon has been validated by academia) has opened up a vast field for the critical exploration of texts hitherto unavailable for the larger readership. The proposed research is a humble attempt to pay critical attention to the translated texts of Arabic autobiographical works.

The Arabic literary tradition of autobiography: an overview

Arabic literature, a product of a highly developed culture, has a history of more than a thousand years. This literary tradition is both rich and diverse, and Autobiographical texts within this tradition have evolved significantly over time, reflecting the changing cultural, social, and political landscapes of the Arab world. Here is a brief overview of the development of autobiographical texts in Arabic literature:

a) Pre-Islamic Period: The earliest forms of autobiographical expression in Arabic literature can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period, where poets would often include personal anecdotes and reflections in their qasidas (odes). These poems were a means of expressing personal grief, boasting, or recounting heroic deeds.
b) Islamic Golden Age (8th to 14th centuries): During the Islamic Golden Age, autobiographical writing became more formalized. Scholars and religious figures began writing about their lives, focusing on their spiritual journeys, travels, and scholarly pursuits. One of the most famous examples is the "Muhammad ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah" (Biography of the Prophet of God), which is an early biography of the Prophet Muhammad. Another notable work is "The Book of Travels" by Ibn Jubayr, which details his pilgrimage to Mecca and his travels through the Islamic world.
c) Mamluk Period (13th to 16th centuries): The Mamluk period saw the continuation of travelogues and biographical dictionaries, which often included autobiographical elements. Scholars would compile works that included their own lives alongside those of their contemporaries, reflecting the importance of lineage and scholarly networks.

d) Ottoman Period (16th to 19th centuries): Under Ottoman rule, autobiographical writing continued, with a focus on the lives of statesmen, scholars, and poets. The genre of seyahatname (travelogue) became particularly popular, with works like Evliya Çelebi's "Seyahatname" offering insights into the author's extensive travels across the Ottoman Empire.
e) Modern Period (19th century onwards): The modern period brought significant changes to Arabic autobiographical writing. With the rise of nationalism, colonialism, and the struggle for independence, autobiographies began to reflect these broader themes. Writers like Taha Hussein in Egypt and Khalil Gibran in Lebanon started to write more introspective and personal accounts, often challenging traditional norms and exploring themes of identity, modernity, and existential questions.
f) Contemporary Period: In the contemporary Arab world, autobiographical texts have become increasingly diverse, encompassing memoirs, diaries, novels with strong autobiographical elements, and even graphic novels. Writers have used autobiography to explore a wide range of topics, including war, exile, gender, sexuality, and personal trauma. The genre has also seen an increase in women's autobiographical writing, offering perspectives that were often marginalized in earlier periods.

Throughout its history, the Arabic literary tradition has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt and evolve, with autobiographical texts serving as a mirror to the changing face of Arab society and culture.

Contextual background

This research project proposes a critical analysis of the portrayal of self in select Arabic autobiographical texts spanning from 900 CE to 1900 CE, as translated into English. The project aims to delve into the complex interplay between individual identity and broader socio-cultural, religious, and historical contexts within the Islamic world. By examining these texts, we can gain valuable insights into the evolution of self-conception over a millennium.

Early Islamic Period (900-1200 CE): During the early Islamic period, autobiographical writing often took the form of spiritual memoirs, with authors reflecting on their religious experiences and journeys towards enlightenment. One notable example is the "Risala" (Epistle) of al-Ghazali (1058-1111), a prominent Islamic philosopher and theologian. In this work, al-Ghazali recounts his spiritual crisis and subsequent quest for truth, which led him to abandon his academic career and embrace a life of asceticism. His portrayal of self is deeply

introspective, highlighting the struggle between reason and faith, and the search for spiritual fulfilment.

The Middle Period (1200-1500 CE): The middle period saw the rise of travel literature, with authors such as Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/69) and Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217) documenting their journeys across the Islamic world and beyond. These travelogues not only provide valuable historical and geographical information but also offer insights into the authors' personal experiences and encounters with different cultures. Ibn Battuta's "Rihla," for instance, is a vivid account of his travels, which spanned nearly three decades and covered much of the Islamic world, Africa, and Asia. Through his narrative, Ibn Battuta constructs a self that is both a keen observer of the world and a participant in the events he describes.

The Late Period (1500-1900 CE): By the late period, autobiographical writing had become more diverse, with authors exploring a wider range of themes, including politics, social life, and personal reflections. A notable example is the "Mudhakkirat" (Memoirs) of al-Suyuti (1445-1505), a prolific Egyptian scholar who wrote extensively on his life, including his struggles with poverty and his encounters with various rulers and scholars. Al-Suyuti's portrayal of self is that of a learned and pious individual, deeply engaged with the intellectual and spiritual life of his time.

Significance of the Research :

‘The portrayal of self in Arabic autobiographical texts from 900 CE to 1900 CE’ is a rich and complex subject, reflecting the diverse cultural, religious, and intellectual landscapes of the Islamic world during this period. These texts, which include memoirs, diaries, travelogues, and spiritual autobiographies, offer unique insights into the lives and minds of their authors, as well as the societies in which they lived. Analysing these works in English translation provides a valuable opportunity to explore the ways in which individuals from the past have understood and represented themselves, their experiences, and their relationships with the world around them. The following aspects are noteworthy in this endeavour.
By examining how individuals constructed their identities within an Islamic framework, the research can challenge stereotypes and offer a more nuanced understanding of Islamic thought and culture.

a) Evolution of Self**:** Tracing the development of self-conception over a millennium can provide insights into the dynamic nature of Islamic societies and their interactions with other cultures.

b) Cross-Cultural Perspective: The project offers a valuable cross-cultural perspective on the genre of autobiography, expanding our understanding of its forms and functions in different cultural contexts.
c) Translation and Interpretation: The analysis of translation challenges can contribute to ongoing discussions about the complexities of cross-cultural textual analysis.
d) Individual and Society: By examining how individuals positioned themselves within their social and historical contexts, the research can shed light on broader social, political, and economic changes.
e) Gender, Class, and Religion: The study of how these factors shaped autobiographical narratives can contribute to our understanding of social hierarchies and power dynamics.
f) Interdisciplinary Approach: The project has the potential to bridge disciplines such as history, literature, religious studies, and cultural studies.
g) New Insights: By combining insights from different fields, the research can generate new and innovative perspectives on the subject matter.
h) Public Engagement and Education
i) Challenging Stereotypes: The findings of the research can be used to challenge stereotypes about Islamic cultures and promote intercultural understanding.
j) Educational Resources: The project can contribute to the development of educational resources that explore the complexities of identity and culture.

The research would be a worthwhile attempt to contribute to our understanding of the human experience, the complexities of cultural identity, and the power of narrative to shape our perception of the world.

Objectives:

- To explore the different genres of Arabic autobiography and their contribution to self-representation.
- To investigate the relationship between the author's social status and the portrayal of self.
- To analyse the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping autobiographical narratives.
- To compare and contrast self-representations in Arabic autobiographies with those in other cultural contexts.

By achieving these objectives, research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Islamic world, the genre of autobiography, and the complexities of cross-cultural textual analysis

Hypotheses:

- The concept of self in Arabic autobiographies undergoes a significant transformation from a primarily religious and communal identity in the early period.
- Islamic doctrines and practices exert a profound influence on the construction of self in early Arabic autobiographies, shaping authors' perceptions of their place in the world and their relationship to God.
- English translations of Arabic autobiographies may distort or misrepresent the original authors' intended self-portrayal due to cultural, linguistic, and interpretive differences.

Methodology

As the proposed research mainly involves textual analysis, library research would be the most suitable method for it. The literary analysis would furthermore consist of a judicious balance between examining the formalistic as well as the thematic concerns; the Technique of close reading will be used in order to facilitate textual analysis. Web Resources would be extensively utilized. The MLA (9^{th} edition) style of research writing will be followed.

Review of Literature

The existing scholarship in this subject is limited to a few academic studies. One could synthesize the various perspectives, methodologies, and findings that scholars have presented over the years.

Books

1. "Autobiography and Islamic Scholars in the Maghrib, 1300-1800" by Amira K. Bennison (2017)-This book examines how Islamic scholars in the Maghrib (North Africa) used autobiography to construct their identities and careers.
   "The Autobiography of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Hamadani (d. 562/1166)" by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Hamadani, translated by Clifford Edmund Bosworth (1980)

A translation of an important medieval Arabic autobiography, providing a glimpse into the life of a scholar and traveler.

2. "Taha Hussein: An Egyptian Voice" by Shereen Khairallah (1980)
   This book discusses the life and work of Taha Hussein, a leading figure of the Egyptian literary renaissance, focusing on his autobiographical work.
3. "Out of Egypt: Scenes and Essays" by Taha Hussein, translated by E.H. Paxton, Hilary Wayment, and Kenneth Cragg (1983)
   A collection of essays and scenes from the life of Taha Hussein, offering insights into his thoughts and experiences.
4. "A Prisoner of Love: My Life with Omar Khayyam" by Amin Banani (1995)
   This book delves into the life and work of the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, including discussions on his autobiographical elements.
5. "The Last Autumn: A Diary of Palestine 1946-1948" by Fawzi al-Qawuqji (2016)
   The diary of a military leader during the 1948 Palestine war, offering a firsthand account of the events leading up to the creation of Israel.

Articles

1. "Autobiography, Islamic History, and the Genre of Tārīkh" by Chase F. Robinson (2001)
   Published in Al-Abhath, this article explores the relationship between autobiography and the writing of Islamic history.
2. "The Autobiography of a Damascene Physician: Salih ibn Nasr al-Tawil and His Dīwān" by Stefan Leder (2004)
   This article, published in the journal Die Welt des Islams, discusses the autobiographical elements in the work of a 17th-century Damascene physician.
3. "Autobiographical Writings in Early Islamic Literature" by Harald Motzki (2001)
   An article that examines the early forms of autobiographical writing in Islamic literature.
4. "The Autobiography of al-Jamāl al-Bukhārī: A Fifteenth-Century Document of Central Asian Sufism from the John Rylands University Library of Manchester" by Jo-Ann Gross (1992)
   Published in the journal Manuscripta Orientalia, this article provides an analysis of a significant Central Asian Sufi autobiography.
5. "The Autobiography of Ibn Buluggin, Last Zirid Amir of Granada" by Ibn Buluggin, translated by Amin T. Tibi (1986)
   An article that discusses the autobiography of a 11th-century Muslim ruler in Spain.

These resources provide a comprehensive overview of Arabic autobiography, from its early forms to its modern expressions. Some of these works are more academic in nature and require some background knowledge in Islamic studies or Middle Eastern history.

Scope and Limitations

The research, *The Portrayal of Self in Select Arabic Autobiographical Texts: A Critical Analysis*, aims to explore the evolution of self-conception in Arabic autobiographies from 900 CE to 1900 CE. The modern period and the contemporary period texts have been excluded in order to narrow down the focus to certain common thematic concerns that link these autobiographical accounts (900 to 1900 CE).Thirteen autobiographical texts have been identified for the study on the basis of their significance. These are the accounts by the following authors:

1. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī(1445–1505).
2. Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809–873).
3. al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, (905 - 910).
4. al-‘Aydarūs(1570–1628).
5. ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī(1261–1336).
6. Ibn al-‘Adīm(1192/93–1262).
7. Abū Shāma(1203–1268).
8. al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn Hibat Allāh al-Shīrāzī (1000–1077).
9. al-‘Imād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī(1125–1201).
10. Alī Mubārak(1824–1893).
11. Abd Allāh al-Turjumān(1352–1432?).
12. Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī(1696–1772).
13. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī(1162–1231).

The specific focus will be on:

- Identifying dominant self-representations: Examining how authors portray themselves in relation to Islamic, cultural, and social factors.
- Analysing the influence of gender, class, and religion: Understanding how these factors shape autobiographical narratives.

- Evaluating the impact of translation: Assessing how English translations influence the understanding of the portrayed self.

By delving into these aspects, a deeper understanding of the construction of self in Islamic culture and the role of autobiography in shaping cultural and historical narratives can be attained.

Limitations

Given the vastness of the subject and the constraints of a research project, certain limitations are inherent:

- Textual Selection: The choice of texts will inevitably be selective, limiting the scope of generalization.
- Translation Bias: Reliance on English translations may introduce biases and inaccuracies in the interpretation of original texts.
- Cultural Nuances: Fully capturing the complexities of cultural and religious nuances in translated texts can be challenging.
- Time Constraints: The broad time period of 900-1900 CE may necessitate a focus on specific periods or authors, limiting the overall scope of analysis.
- Availability of Sources: Limited access to original texts or reliable translations might constrain the research.

Plan of the thesis:

The research work will be divided in the following four chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Research question and objectives
- Significance of the study
- Overview of Arabic autobiographical tradition
- Research methodology and limitations

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

- Key concepts: self, identity, autobiography

- Theoretical underpinnings (e.g., postcolonial theory, gender studies, cultural studies)
- Review of relevant theories on self-representation

Chapter 3: Critical Analysis of the select Autobiographical Texts:

- Critical Analysis of the select Autobiographical Texts with the key findings focusing on formalistic and thematic concerns in them.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

- Summary of key findings
- Contributions to the field of Arabic literature and autobiography
- Implications for future research

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